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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the variety of ways in which managers use language in sociolinguistically sensitive ways to get things done at work. Drawing on a database of over 300 interactions in a range of New Zealand workplaces, aspects of power (how things are accomplished), politeness (the importance of small talk), and solidarity (the difference humor makes in social relationships) in the workplaces are analyzed. Most of the data come from small, relatively informal workplace meetings and discussions fulfilling a wide variety of work-related purposes: planning; conveying instructions; seeking advice; checking reports; solving problems or accomplishing tasks; providing feedback; and evaluating proposals. Social talk and telephone calls and some longer meetings were also analyzed. Participant background and contextual information was also gathered. Results reveal strategies used by managers, including overt and explicit strategies that both reflect and enact the manager's authority in a variety of ways. Power, politeness, respect, collegiality, and humor were all identified as significant strategies. Contains 17 references. (MSE)

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Managing in style: flexible discourse at work*

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Good managers are good communicators. Successful modern managers need more than sound organisational skills. They also need to be able to get their message across to those they work with. Getting things done at work involves a variety of sociolinguistic skills. Drawing on a database of over 300 interactions in a range of New Zealand workplaces, this paper discusses and illustrates the many ways in which competent managers adapt their language to the context in which they are operating, selecting the most effective style for the situation.

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Introduction

We all recognise that successful modern managers need more than sound organisational skills. They also need to be able to get their message across to those they work with. It has become a truism that good managers are good communicators. But what exactly does it mean to be a good communicator? How can we assess a person's communications skills? That is where the sociolinguist enters the picture.

Getting things done at work involves a variety of sociolinguistic skills. Managers need to know how to use language in ways which not only avoid giving offence but which actively take account of people's need to maintain "face". Well-run organisations have managers who pay attention to interpersonal relations, who choose appropriate ways of asking people to do things for them, and who recognise that allowing time for small talk and humour in the workplace can make the difference between a dull, uninspired and uninspiring workforce, and a creative, energetic group of colleagues who are a pleasure to work with. This paper discusses a variety of ways in which effective managers use language in sociolinguistically sensitive ways to get things done at work. In particular, it reports the results of analysing local New Zealand data, rather than using overseas textbooks as its source. I describe aspects of power, politeness and solidarity in New Zealand workplaces: how managers get things done (power), the importance of small talk at work (politeness), and the difference humour makes to social relationships in the workplace (solidarity).

Language plays an important part in creating a particular kind of work environment. The boss who begins the day with a friendly chat establishes a very different work environment from one who arrives with a barrage of instructions for

her or his staff. Correspondingly, when we join a new workplace we need to learn the norms for interaction which obtain there - the appropriate ways of addressing and referring to people, the acceptable levels of formality for use in meetings of different sizes, and involving people of different status. And we learn how to use language to negotiate new meanings with new colleagues. Interaction is a dynamic process and language is a crucial resource in managing social relations at work.

A great deal of sociolinguistic research is based on the assumption that the context in which an encounter takes place significantly affects how we interpret what is said, and that it is also central in defining the relevant social identities in any particular encounter. Participants bring a great deal of background knowledge to any interaction which enables them to understand what is going on, and assists them in making effective and appropriate contributions. As Gumperz (1992: 303) points out,

> "interpretation of what a speaker intends to convey at any one point rests on socially constructed knowledge of what the encounter is about and what is to be achieved."

To exemplify, an accurate interpretation of the intended meaning of an utterance such as *you shouldn't be taking work home* will differ according to the relevant background knowledge brought to bear. If it is said by a manager in work time, it might indicate that the manager is concerned about the addressee's ability to properly manage his or her work. If such an utterance occurred after work over a drink, it might be interpreted as an expression of sympathy or concern. Background knowledge about the role relationships involved, as well as the kind of talk appropriate in each setting, are obviously relevant to how participants interpret utterances in their sequential context.

Similarly the way in which a message such as this is expressed will be tailored to the specific social context and negotiated between participants. So a manager talking to a status equal might express the message in a humorous form: eg. *"can't keep up with the work I see"*, while the same manager might encode the same message rather differently to a subordinate eg. *hey Julie, you work hard enough during the day, you shouldn't be taking work home*, and differently again to the CEO eg. *that bag looks heavy, I guess you only manage by taking some work home.*

A second basic tenet of recent sociolinguistic analysis is the intrinsically dynamic nature of social interaction. This is evident when we look at the way people adapt their language in the course of an interaction. Meaning is not fixed and static but negotiable and dynamic. So the significance of any utterance depends crucially on understanding not only the social context but also the discourse context in which it occurred. What precedes and follows helps determine what something might mean. The sequential structures in an interaction provide the means by which participants jointly construct a particular social order and come to a shared interpretation of what is going on (Drew and Heritage 1992). To give a very simple example, the significance and implications of a statement such as *you shouldn't be taking work home* will be very different if it follows an utterance such as *this is a confidential matter* as opposed to *you are looking really tired, May.*

In the discussion below, the interpretation of the complex meanings of particular utterances draws heavily on interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982, 1992), an approach which takes detailed account of the context in which utterances occur. This includes the immediate discourse context, as well as the social setting and relationships between the participants, and the reasons for their interaction. The data collection methodology (see below) provided a wealth of ethnographic information which assisted the contextualisation of interpretations. More broadly, the analysis also draws on politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987). Any analysis of the way managers use language in the workplace is inevitably concerned with the ways in which power and solidarity are enacted through discourse. Politeness theory provides a useful frameworks underpinning the analysis in this paper.[1]

The Wellington Language in the Workplace Project

The data which underlies the discussion below is was collected as part of the Language in the Workplace Project based at Victoria University. The project has the following goals:

(1) to analyse the features of effective interpersonal communication in a variety of workplaces from a sociolinguistic perspective; and

(2) to explore the practical implications of the results of the research for a range of New Zealand workplaces.

Effective communication with clients and colleagues is clearly crucial to the smooth and productive running of an organisation or business, as many training programmes recognise. But there is remarkably little research which examines in detail how people actually communicate verbally with their colleagues at work on a daily basis, and how they use language to manage the inevitable tensions between their various social and professional roles. Previous research has tended to focus on specialised contexts such as classrooms, courtrooms and doctor-patient interactions (eg Drew and Heritage 1992), or to use material derived from indirect sources such as self-report data, interviews, and anecdotal observations (eg see Williams 1988, Mott and Petrie 1995). The results have often been rather prescriptive, with rigid rules for how to run a meeting, for example, or how to manage others at work. Moreover, there is almost no New Zealand data to provide a resource for those teaching communication skills in New Zealand workplaces. Our goal was to collect genuine face-to-face spoken interaction in New Zealand workplaces in order to explore the wide diversity of ways that New Zealanders use to get things done effectively at work.

During 1996 and 1997, the Language in the Workplace team collected over 300 interactions in four New Zealand government agencies. These workplaces include one with a high proportion of women, one with a high proportion of Maori workers, and two with an ethnic and gender balance more closely reflecting the New Zealand norm. Altogether, 251 people (152 women and 99 men) from a range of ages and levels within each organisation were recorded. In terms of ethnicity, 111 of the participants are New Zealand Pakeha, 114 are Maori, and 26 are from other ethnic groups, such as Samoan or Chinese.

The bulk of the data consists of small, relatively informal work-related meetings and discussions ranging in time between twenty seconds and two hours. Such meetings fulfil a wide variety of purposes in these workplaces: to plan, to convey instructions, to seek advice, to check reports, to solve a problem or do a task, to provide feedback, to evaluate proposals, and so on. The database also includes other types of interaction, such as social talk and telephone calls, and a number of larger and generally longer meetings were also videotaped. This data comes mainly from policy

and advisory units, an environment where talk is integral to the core business of the workplace. The database thus provides an especially rich source for investigating how language functions in the ongoing construction of relationships in New Zealand workplaces.

The methodology developed for the project was designed to give participants maximum control over the data collection process (see Stubbe 1998). A group of volunteers from each workplace tape-recorded a range of their everyday work interactions over a period of about two weeks. Some kept a recorder and microphone on their desks, others carried the equipment round with them.

All those involved provided information on their ethnic background, home language, age and so on, contextual information, and permission for the data to be used for linguistic analysis. Throughout the process participants were free to edit and delete material as they wished. Even after they had completed recording and handed over the tapes, they could ask us to edit out material which they felt in retrospect they did not wish us to analyse. Over a period of time, however, people increasingly ignored the recording equipment, and there are often comments at the end of interactions indicating people had forgotten about the tape recorder.[2] Also over time the amount of material they deleted, or which they asked us to edit out, decreased dramatically. By handing over control of the recording process in this way, an excellent research relationship with our workplace participants was developed, based on mutual trust. In return for guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, the volunteers provided a wide range of fascinating material.

More recently, the methodology has been adapted to collect data in a wider range of workplaces, including large corporate commercial organisations such as Mobil Oil (NZ) Ltd and New Zealand Telecom, small private businesses such as nurseries and garden centres in the Hawkes Bay area, and a hide tanning factory in Auckland. The latter extensions of the project have a strongly "applied" component. The Hawkes Bay data is being collected from "sheltered" workplaces: i.e. small businesses which provide opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to begin work in a supportive context. The value of genuine data from the workplaces where students will be placed is obvious. The Auckland data is being collected from a factory which employs large numbers of staff for whom English is a second language, and which

provides ESOL courses for its staff. Again, accurate information about the ways in which English is used in the factory will be of direct value to those learning English to assist them to cope in the factory environment.

The analyses undertaken to date have encompassed a wide range of pragmatic aspects of workplace talk, including directives (Holmes 1998a), social talk (Holmes in press), humour (Holmes 1998b), problem-solving (Stubbe forthcoming) and management (Holmes, Stubbe and Vine 1998). In what follows, I focus on how managers use language to get things done at work, including some consideration of the place of small talk in oiling interactional wheels, and the uses of humour to maintain good relationships in the workplace.

Getting things done at work

Managers control what goes on at work in a variety of ways. One very obvious way of getting things done at work is to "do power" quite explicitly using what Brown and Levinson (1987) call "on record" or very direct strategies. Two examples of such strategies are "setting the agenda" and "summarising progress".[3]

Direct control strategies

Setting the agenda

Managers set work agendas, both in terms of their section's work programme over a period of time, and at a more specific level in particular meetings. The managers in our data often made it clear at the beginning of a meeting what they expected to cover and in what order. This is one strategy for asserting control of the meeting or "doing power". In (1), Hera sets the agenda for discussion right at the beginning of the interaction, in this case making arrangements for Ana, her administrative assistant to complete certain tasks.

Example (1)[4]

1	Hera:	okay um now we're about to start with the um + development session
2		this afternoon we've got an outside speaker
3	Ana:	okay
4	Hera:	which means that you'll be + out here by yourself and I wondered if you
5		wouldn't mind spending some of that time in contacting + while no-one
6		else is around contacting the people for their interviews and setting up

7 the appointment times for their interviews

Other typical agenda setting utterances in the data included statements such as

- *what I'd like to do is...,*
- *I've got a couple of things...*
- *I just wanted to finish off where we got to yesterday*
- *..and that's what this meeting is about.*

These utterances are explicit indicators of the ways in which managers organise the discourse to suit their objectives.

Summarising progress

Another relatively explicit strategy more senior workers often used to manage a meeting was to summarise progress at given intervals. The devices they used included asking questions and making decisions explicit at regular points throughout the meeting. In the following example, Barbara and her manager, Ruth, are discussing how to deal with a questionnaire Barbara has to fill in on behalf of their organisation. After talking informally for some time about the issues involved, in (2) Ruth sums up what she thinks they have agreed to do.

Example (2)

1	Ruth:	so where are we at in terms of + I mean you're inclined to want
2		to pull back a little bit
3	Barbara:	yeah
4	Ruth:	but to find out a bit more from um Rei about just our- one expressing
5		our concerns about the way in which the questions are framed
6	Barbara:	mm
7	Ruth:	and secondly about what control we'll have over the way in which the
8		information might be used
9	Barbara:	mm
10	Ruth:	those are the two main things eh

Note that, finally, even though Barbara has provided minimal responses (lines 3,6,9) to signal her agreement with each point, Ruth explicitly checks that Barbara agrees with her summary (line 10 *those are the two main things eh)* before moving on to the next topic.

In these examples, the managers "do power" by explicitly controlling the development of the interaction: they state the agenda, and they monitor the progress of the discussion by summarising, reformulating and confirming understanding.

Issuing explicit directives

Managers are responsible for managing and organising other people as well as the work programmes to which they contribute. So those in positions of authority also tended to give more direct orders or instructions than their subordinates. These were often realised in quite overt forms, such as the unmitigated imperative used by Hera in (3) line 6, *so check to see what time the plane actually lands*. Explicit directives of this kind were not produced by subordinates to their superiors.

Example (3)

1	Hera: ...	or she comes in on the ten o'clock flight I think it'll be too
2		tight for this
3	Ana:	yeah
4	Hera:	although we could wait a bit ++ that would be the ideal one +
5		come in on the ten o'clock flight + assuming it lands at
6		so check to see what time the plane actually lands
7	Ana:	okay

Other examples of quite explicit directives from managers to subordinates included

- *follow that up*
- *check that out*
- *ring the applicants and say they've been shortlisted.*
- *can you get onto them and organise a meeting immediately if not sooner,*
- *that needs to be couriered today*

It is interesting to note that the contexts in which they were produced, the penultimate interrogative (*can you...*) and the final declarative (*that needs to be..*) are just as explicit as the imperative forms.

Explicit directives such as these tend to be used only when the people concerned are in very clear authority relationships. Indeed there is some evidence that when they are used to equals they can cause offence or be regarded as unacceptable. Tannen (1994: 195) quotes one manager commenting on another's style:

"Well, her style was very direct. I think very direct and abrupt. Because that was one of the criticism I had of her ... was a, somewhat of a lack of tact. Because she could make statements which were right, but not tactfully made. And she tended to upset - or ruffle some feathers".

Less explicit control strategies

Using mitigated directives

When people are equals or near equals, it is much more common to find directives being given in a "hedged" or mitigated form, as illustrated in (4) where Jocelyn tells her fellow manager, Kim, to add a late application to their short list.

Example (4)

1 Joc: there's one more late application
2 Kim: okay
3 Joc: so we might as well put that in mightn't we

In certain circumstances, such mitigated directives are appropriate to subordinates too. As politeness theory predicts, mitigated directives occurred when people did not know each other well, i.e. social distance was relatively great (Brown and Levinson 1987). So at the beginning of their first meeting, Hera uses a mitigated directive *I wondered if you wouldn't mind...* to her new administrative assistant, Ana, as (5) illustrates.

Example (5) :

1 Hera: which means that you'll be + out here by yourself
2 and I wondered if you wouldn't mind spending some of that time
3 in contacting + while no-one else is around contacting the people for
4 their interviews and setting up the the appointment times for their
5 interviews

Examples (6) and (7) illustrate similar mitigated directives, with managers using the inclusive pronoun *we*, although there was no doubt that it was the addressee alone who was to undertake the task.

Example (6)

Manager: what we might need to do is send down a confirmation note

Example (7)

Manager: if we just tell them exactly where it is

Mitigated directives are also used when the specified task is "beyond the normal requirements" of the job or, in Brown and Levinson's terms, the "ranking of the imposition" is high (1987: 76). So, asking her secretary to stay late at work, Kate used the following mitigated or hedged form.

Example (8)

1 Kate: I know this is a bit last minute Brenda
2 but but do you think you could possibly stay a bit later tonight
3 it's just that I need to get the meeting agenda ready for tomorrow

Note Kate first provides a preparatory apologetic acknowledgement of the imposition (line 1 *I know this is a bit last minute*), and then heavily mitigates the directive by using an interrogative form (line 2 *do you ...)* and several epistemic modal devices (lines 2-3 *possibly, do you think, a bit, just*). Finally, she provides a reason for her directive (line 3). Compare this with the much more direct and explicit form of the directive used to ask Brenda to do something which is part of her expected duties, as illustrated in line 2 of (9).

Example (9)

1 Kate: OK here's the list
2 ring all the people on it and tell them the meeting is 10 tomorrow

Using indirect directives

When managers wanted to persuade other managers to help them they often used even more indirect strategies. Sometimes the directive would be negotiated between them over several turns. In (10) Paula wants Fay to take the minutes of the meeting they are planning. Since they are of equal status this has to be carefully negotiated.

Example (10)

1 Paula: well I guess we'll need a record of the meeting

2 Fay: yeah that would be really useful
3 Paula: it's really important everything's in writing around this issue
4 Fay: mm
5 Kate: since I'll be chairing ++
6 Fay: would you like me to do it this time
7 Paula: well if it isn't too much I mean if you could
8 Fay: OK
9 Paula: that would be great

The directive is very indirect indeed, and the significance of the pause (marked ++) at line 5 should not be under-estimated.

When people want a favour from those who are superior in status, they are generally even more circumspect in the strategies they use. One common device is to begin the interaction with small talk. Indeed small talk plays a very important role in establishing good rapport in the workplace.

Small Talk in the Workplace

Effective managers know the importance of small talk at work. Example (11) occurred as Diana, a manager, entered the office of her administrative assistant, Sally, at the beginning of the day to collect mail.

Example (11)

1 Di: good morning Sally lovely day
2 Sal: yes don't know what we're doing here we should be out in the sun
3 Di: mm pity about the work really
4 Sal: how are your kids?
5 Di: much better thank goodness + any mail?

This is a typical example of small talk at work. It covers standard small talk topics – the weather, complaints about work, mention of family, health. Its main function is to oil the social wheels, to maintain good relations between Diana and Sally.[5]

"Doing collegiality" in the workplace

Small talk is a crucial aspect of workplace talk. It serves the social functions of constructing, expressing, maintaining and reinforcing interpersonal relationships between those who work together. Small talk is an indispensable component of "doing collegiality". (12) is a typical example of the brief exchanges which take place regularly between workplace colleagues as they pass on the stairs or in the corridors.

Example (12)

1	Jon:	hello hello /haven't seen you for a while\
2	May:	/hi \ well I've been a bit busy
3	Jon:	must have lunch sometime
4	May:	yea good idea give me a ring

Jon and May indicate mutual good intentions as they do maintenance work on their collegial relationship. Jon's use of "sometime" in his invitation, is an indication of the largely symbolic status of the interchange, and this is ratified by May's equally non-specific suggestion that he ring her; no precise time or date is mentioned (cf Wolfson et al. 1983). These are crucial clues that this is a symbolic exchange - though follow up may occur, it isn't required: this exchange makes no specific commitments. Its function is fundamentally social - maintaining good work relations.

The beginnings and ends of workplace interactions are further important positions for small talk which is attending to social or "positive face" needs. Small talk mitigates a possible sense of rejection and "consolidates" the relationship (Laver 1975: 232). In (13), Helen, the manager, and Beth, her administrative assistant, had not seen each other for a while and they are doing some obligatory "catching up".

Example (13)

1	Hel:	well it's nice to have you back welcome back
2	Beth:	yes had a very good holiday [tut]
3	Hel:	and feel well rested? so where did you go
4	Beth:	no [laughs]
5	Hel:	oh well
6	Beth:	it's just just been busy with my mum and then she had me take her
7		here and take her there and [laughs]
8	Hel:	oh
9	Beth:	so no it was good I didn't have to worry about meals I didn't have to
10		worry about bills or kids or um work or anything just me

11 Hel: (just) a holiday for you
12 Beth: yeah + [tut] it was UNREAL [laughs]
13 Hel: now listen are you going to be wanting to take time off during the
14 school holidays

Despite what is suggested by the occurrence of *welcome back,* this interaction occurred at the end of the meeting between Helen and Beth. Urgent business had displaced it from the beginning of the encounter. At the end of the meeting, Helen, a good manager, pays attention to their personal relationship by "licensing" social talk (line 3 *and feel well rested? so where did you go*).

"Managing" small talk

The small talk between Helen and Beth maintains their good relationship; it is an example of "doing collegiality" in the workplace. Note however, that Helen, the superior, brings the small talk to an end and switches back to business (lines 13-14). Managing small talk effectively, knowing how much small talk to use, and when to extend it into more personal or social talk is a sophisticated sociolinguistic skill which is very evident in the discourse of effective managers in our data.

Effective managers manage small talk, as well as other aspects of workplace interaction. Those in positions of authority generally determine how much small talk there will be at the beginning and end of an interaction. And, as illustrated in example (7), the superior in an interaction typically has the deciding voice in licensing small talk (cf Hornyak cited in Tannen 1994: 223-4, Clyne 1994: 87). The manager is the person who shifts the talk back to task-oriented business talk (see also example (11)). In other contexts, too, such as the opening of meetings, superiors indicate how much small talk is acceptable by taking the initiative in shifting to business. Using small talk to manage the boundaries between business talk and social talk is a valuable sociolinguistic skill which those in positions of responsibility can use to their advantage.

On the other hand, it should be noted that subordinates may also manage small talk strategically. In (14), Tom negotiates what he wants very skilfully, using small talk to good effect.

Example (14)

1 Tom: can I just have a quick word
2 Greg: yeah sure have a seat
3 Tom: [sitting down] great weather eh
4 Greg: mm
5 Tom: yeah been a good week did you get away skiing at the weekend
6 Greg: yeah we did + now how can I help you
7 Tom: I was just wondering if I could take Friday off and make it
8 a long weekend
9 Greg: mm I don't see any problem with that + you will have finished that
10 report by then won't you

Tom uses small talk to reduce social distance and emphasise his good relationship with his superior, before requesting a day's leave. Superiors vary in the ways in which they respond to such talk with different people. As mentioned above, the superior finally has the right to cut the small talk short, and proceed to business. In (14), after an initial positive response, Greg moves the talk to business, perhaps suspecting that Tom's reference to skiing is not entirely disinterested small talk, but may involve a strategic component too. Nevertheless, both participants concluded this exchange feeling pleased. Both felt they had managed the interaction well. Tom had permission for his day off, and Greg had ensured that Tom knew the conditions of his agreement. Though the first six lines may seem strictly redundant to a time-and-motion analyst, they are achieving important social goals by establishing good rapport between the two men. It could, of course, have been very different if Tom had been less socially adept, or if Greg had been more directive and confrontational. The results could have been a protracted argument with neither side achieving their goals. So despite the apparent initial "waste of time", this exchange is a model of effective communication.

Humour in the workplace

Finally I turn briefly to some of the social functions of humour in the workplace.[5] Humour is a discourse strategy which can be used for many functions at work, including both those which have been the focus of discussion above, namely getting things done more effectively, and establishing social rapport and improving personal relationships at work.

Getting things done

As discussed above, people generally take account of the social and role relationships between themselves and others when they want to get things done at work, as well as the extent to which their request is a reasonable one. It is often strategic to mitigate directives so that they are not experienced as too direct or tactless. One way of doing this is by using humour as a softener. In our workplace data, humour was used by some managers with considerable skill for this purpose.

Example (15) illustrates how Kevin, the systems manager, uses humour to signal to Harry, a systems analyst, that he needs to complete his report which is overdue.

Example (15)

1 Kevin: hey Harry I noticed that May is just sitting around twiddling her
2 thumbs + well + painting her nails actually + waiting for
3 that final report

Kevin is letting Harry know that he has noticed he is behind schedule. He is telling him to get his report finished - but he is doing it in a humorous and non-threatening way. The results were positive - Harry's report reached May within the hour. One of the key characteristics of effective managers is illustrated here, namely, stylistic flexibility. Good managers know there are many ways to get their deadlines met. Effective bosses adapt their style to the situation and their addressees with extraordinary skill.

(16) provides a similar example. Kate and Melanie are discussing a proposal. Kate suggests Melanie should take it away and work on it further, but she attenuates her directive with humour.

Example (16)

1 Kate: well we've just about done it to death I think
2 it's about ready for you to give give it mouth-to-mouth rescuscitation
3 do you think
4 [Both laugh]

The use of *we* emphasises the collegiality at the basis of Kate's relationship with Melanie, while the incongruity of the metaphor is a source of humour, attenuating

the directive which might appear to threaten that collegiality. In (17), Jane, the superior, uses a similar strategy to soften her "hurry up" to her secretary Marion, who is gossiping,

Example (17)

1 Jane: OK Marion I'm afraid serious affairs of state will have to wait
2 we have some trivial issues needing our attention
3 [All laugh]

There are several indications that this utterance is motivated by politeness and oriented to the addressee's face needs: again the use of the inclusive pronouns *we* and *our* , function to align the manager and the secretary, expressing positive politeness and solidarity; and the source of the humour itself - the ironic downgrading of their on-task work to *trivial* compared to the social talk or work gossip in which Marion was engaged - also serves this purpose. In these instances, humour is an effective means of softening directives, and maintaining good relations between managers and those who work for them.

Signalling social rapport

These examples also suggest the more fundamental and extensive function of humour - to establish good social rapport with others. This is a very important contribution which humour makes to the construction, development and maintenance of good workplace relationships. Two former students who now run a business offering communication systems analysis to Auckland businesses wrote to me recently after reading an article I had written on the place of humour in the workplace for *New Zealand Business* (Holmes 1998c). They said

> Your article touched on something we have often noted in our sessions in companies. Humour can be a powerful tool for establishing a sense of friendliness and familiarity - it can break down the cool - sometimes icy - climate at the opening of a meeting or session, especially when people come together to communicate from various divisions of an organisation which don't ordinarily meet, and are therefore unsure about each other's rules and norms (Tim Walsh p.c.)

Amusing others with banter and witty remarks is one way of achieving this. (18) makes fun of the project team's primitive filing system, but in the process establishes

good rapport between Rod and Sam and the other team members at the meeting. (Silvia is the team's administrative assistant.)

Example (18)

1 Rod: how do you keep track of the projects?
2 Sam: bits of sticky yellow paper all over the wall +
3 better known as the Silvia system
4 [General laughter]

Sam's humorous comment causes them all to laugh, developing and cementing solidarity between the team members. The shared laughter reflects common attitudes and values in the group. Witty comments, often developed or added to by others, have the same effect. Example (19) occurred in a large meeting. Will and Viv react wittily to something falling past the tenth floor window of the meeting room.

Example (19)

1 Will: whoops someone fell off the roof top
2 Viv: it's the CEO - things must be worse than we thought
3 [General laughter]

As these examples suggest, humour is an effective strategy for building solidarity within a group, but it can also be a subtle device for getting things done. The power of humour lies in its flexibility for a variety of purposes - it can function as a cushion for instruction and criticism, and, importantly, as a source of fun and rapport-building among colleagues.

Conclusion

This paper has described some of the strategies used by New Zealand managers to get things done at work. These include overt and explicit strategies which both reflect and enact the manager's authority in a variety of ways. "Doing power" is one aspect of a manager's professional performance. They also include politeness strategies which pay attention to the face needs of participants. Many New Zealand managers use small talk and social talk to establish good relations at work. Treating others with respect may involve indicating interest in their activities outside the workplace. "Doing collegiality" is an aspect of effective management which is often under-rated. Another way in which rapport is built and maintained within a

workforce is by the use of humour. Humour is an effective way of building solidarity between fellow workers, but it can also be a means of softening a directive or a criticism. Used flexibly, it is another valuable strategy for improving workplace communication.

The research undertaken by the Victoria University Language in the Workplace Project team has established that effective workplace communication is flexible and varied. In particular, it is very carefully designed to take account of a range of contextual factors. Workplace discourse which communicates well is tailored to the person who is being addressed: eg a superior, an equal or a subordinate, someone who is an old acquaintance or a newcomer to the workplace, and so on. Effective discourse takes account of the social setting in which the encounter takes place, eg public or private, a big meeting or a one-to-one encounter, in the tea-room or in the office. And it takes account of the varying objectives of the interaction including both task-oriented aims, such as getting a report revised, and more affective or social aims, such as establishing or maintaining a good relationship between the speaker and the addressee.

So our New Zealand-based research has aimed at unpacking the meaning of the claim that good managers are good communicators. We have found that good managers are sociolinguistically sensitive operators: they choose their strategies to suit the situation. They take account of their relationship with the people they are talking to, the context of the talk, and the difficulty of what they are asking them to do. Their talk reflects awareness of what it is reasonable to expect from a new arrival compared to a long-established PA. They use relatively indirect, polite strategies in some contexts, gentle humour in others, and direct "on the nose" demands when required. These sociolinguistic skills are often developed on the basis of years of experience. But they can also be the result of reflection, careful planning and deliberate practice. That, however, is the topic of a future paper.

NOTES

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[1] See Holmes, Stubbe and Vine (1998) for a more detailed discussion of the relevance of different theoretical frameworks in the analysis of workplace language.

[2] Mott and Petrie (1995: 329) who adopted a similar methodology make the same point.

[3] This section draws on our analysis of ways of constructing professional identity in the workplace (Holmes, Stubbe and Vine 1998).

[4] See Appendix for transcription conventions. A series of dots indicates that a section of the interaction has been omitted. All names used in examples have been changed to protect identities.

[5] See Holmes (in press) for a more detailed discussion of the functions of small talk in the workplace.

[6] See Holmes (1998) for a fuller discussion of this topic, and especially the range of functions of humour in the workplace.

APPENDIX

Transcription conventions

All names are pseudonyms.

YES	Capitals indicate emphatic stress
[laughs]	Paralinguistic features in square brackets
[drawls]	
+	Pause of up to one second
++	Two second pause
..../.....\...	Simultaneous speech
..../.....\...	
(hello)	Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance
?	Rising or question intonation
publicat-	Incomplete or cut-off utterance
-----	Some words omitted

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